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NEWS GUIDE

Business/Stocks

Education

Headline index

NH politics

Sports

War on terror

Weather

OPINION/EDITORIALS

NH Classifieds

Cars

Jobs

Place an ad

Homes

SPECIAL REPORTS

Bike Week '05

Church in crisis

NH lottery

NH Primary '08

Parental notification

Refugees in NH

Shipyard closure

Summer on Lakes

LOCAL COLUMNS

City Hall

Granite Status

John Clayton

Our Gourmet

Publisher's notes

State House Dome

SPORTS COLUMNS

Jim Fennell

Joe Sullivan

OUTDOORS

John Harrigan

Stacey Cole

LISTINGS

NH businesses

NH events

NH links

NH nightlife

NH sex offenders

Support groups

Gale Norton:

Federal recreation sites rely on reasonable use fees

By GALE NORTON

Guest Commentary

HOME TO ONE of the greatest American sculptors, the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site in Cornish, secures New Hampshire's place in our nation's cultural and artistic history. Visitors can travel back in time to the 19th Century world of Augustus Saint-Gaudens, who came to the Granite State to find models for a sculpture of Abraham Lincoln and ended up staying, helping establish an artist's colony in the beautiful New England countryside.

The National Park Service offers tours of the artist's residence, his studio and an exhibit of more than 100 examples of his work. Visitors also enjoy the beautiful gardens and hiking trails on the 150-acre estate.

The cost to visitors is \$5, less than the price of a movie, with children under 16 free. The nominal entrance fee is vital to the maintenance of the site, helping foot the bill for everything from restoring antique tapestries to upgrading the security systems. Even at \$5, the site is probably not the biggest bargain in the National Park System. For \$20 or less, an entire family can enjoy the spectacular beauty of the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, Yellowstone or many other national parks for an entire week.

As reasonable as these fees are, some critics want them abolished. This would be a great mistake.

The idea that visitors should contribute to the upkeep of facilities they use is not new. Many national parks have charged fees since their establishment decades ago, and 46 states currently charge fees at their parks and historic sites. For example, visitors to the Daniel Webster Birthplace in Franklin, administered by the New Hampshire Division of Parks and Recreation, pay \$7 for adults and \$3 for children over 6.

In 1996, Congress authorized federal agencies on a trial basis to charge people a small fee at national parks, wildlife refuges, national forests and



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other recreational areas and use them to provide direct benefits to public lands visitors. Whereas fees collected in the past were transferred to the U.S. Treasury, Congress mandated that 80 percent of the funds be spent at the sites where they were collected as a way of maintaining and enhancing visitor facilities and services.

The recreation fee program has been an enormous success. The funds raised by the fees proved invaluable to managers as they served ever-increasing numbers of people, especially at wildlife refuges and at some lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management, where visitation and recreation soared in the late 1990s.

The program worked so well that Congress last year passed the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, which authorizes the collection of recreation fees for the next 10 years at sites that have visitor facilities to help maintain and improve the facilities. These facilities include maintained trails, boat ramps, hunting blinds, toilet facilities and interpretive signs and programs.

The law also calls on federal agencies to develop a national "America the Beautiful Pass" that people can buy to get access to all federal parks, refuges, forests and other recreational areas where fees are collected. Agencies will also work with states to develop state or regional passes.

A key provision of the new law requires that fees only be charged in areas that have visitor facilities or services. Those who like to venture into wild areas to enjoy nature with few or no amenities will continue to be able to do so without charge. People will still be able to ride their horses, hike, boat and picnic without paying a fee in areas where there are no facilities or visitor services.

Furthermore, no one will pay a fee for general access to national forests, grasslands and BLM areas. No one will be charged to enjoy a view at a scenic overlook. No one under 16 will be charged an entrance fee anywhere. Under the law, the Forest Service is actually removing current fees from more than 400 sites, including 10 in New Hampshire. Likewise, Congress required that federal agencies work hand in hand with state agencies and local communities to oversee fee collection programs in their areas. The public will have an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process before the establishment of any new fees.

Most Americans recognize that they should pay a fee for some government services and facilities. Taxpayers support the State Department, but also pay a \$97 fee to get a passport. Taxpayers pay for road construction, but many state governments charge tolls on turnpikes and bridges. Most people recognize that those who use these facilities and services should pay a nominal fee to support them. In fact, a large majority of visitors polled said they supported recreation fees as long as they were used to pay for the upkeep of recreation areas and facilities on

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federal lands.

Americans expect the best from our parks, refuges, national forests and other public lands. Recreation fees help ensure we can provide the best facilities and services possible on our public lands.

Gale Norton is U.S. secretary of the interior.

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